



FACT SHEET

ASSESSMENT OF READINESS SKILLS DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD

Please retain this information for continual use.

Young children develop rapidly, frequently experiencing tremendous change and growth physically, cognitively, linguistically, and socially. Preschoolers, for example, seem to race from one milestone to the next. Nevertheless, the rate of growth and development among young children varies greatly. Indeed, as a result of this high variability during early childhood, evident in nearly any environment with preschoolers and kindergartners, many professionals balk at labeling children as learning disabled. However, because studies indicate that early intervention can make a significant difference in a child's development, many other professionals want to respond promptly when they note developmental delays or see that certain children are not meeting typical expectations. When this is the case, an appropriate evaluation is necessary to determine whether or not a child will benefit from early intervention and, if so, what kind of intervention. Moreover, an individual comprehensive evaluation that examines at-risk indicators, makes identifications, and advocates service delivery will be appropriate. This is especially true for children with suspected learning disabilities whose profiles frequently exhibit intracognitive differences that can obscure overall abilities.

Children exhibiting signs of developmental delay will benefit from professional, comprehensive assessment in some or all of the following areas:

- *Background information about family, early development, health, language, literacy and educational experiences.* A record of early developmental milestones will provide information about rate of learning, and note should be made of the age at which parents or teachers first observed "problems."
- *Hearing and vision.* Some physiological causes effect developmental delays. For example, a hearing impairment can interfere with language acquisition; a child with a visual impairment may be unable to interpret and interact with his or her environment appropriately.
- *Perception, memory, language, thinking skills, and problem solving.* Assessment of these skills and aptitudes can assist in distinguishing between children delayed in all aspects of development and those slow in a few areas, who otherwise perform as well or, better than their age peers.

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- *Listening comprehension and expressive language:* Observation of the child as he or she communicates with parents, teachers and peers demonstrates his or her ability to comprehend single words, sentences, questions and short stories. A child should be able to use words previously learned, express ideas in an organized way, manipulate the sounds that make words, and play rhyming games, as appropriate. Constraints associated with formal testing may be less evident during observation, revealing more of what a child knows or can express. This is a significant area of observation because other symbolic systems, such as reading, writing, and mathematics are based largely on oral language.
- *Awareness and manipulation of sounds in words, letter names, and picture names:* These are good predictors of early reading.
- *Writing mechanics and early content.* A child's pencil grasp during the writing process, samples of drawings, invented spellings, and pretend messages can effectively supplement the results of more constrained formal testing.
- *Mathematics:* Testing instruments assess a child's verbal, visual and cognitive skills by his or her ability to recognize numerals and perceive quantitative and qualitative characteristics (more, less, bigger, similar, different). Additional informal observation is also valuable.
- *Reasoning:* A child's ability to sort, group, classify objects and attributes, solve problems, and understand cause and effect can be determined by the performance of various tasks and by careful observation.
- *Social and self-help skills and use of non-verbal communication:* Children should demonstrate the ability, progressively, to put on articles of clothing, tie shoes, button buttons, select clothes that are appropriate for different activities and weather conditions, and feed themselves. A child should learn to take turns, as play progresses from sensory exploration to a combination of exploration and representational play. Observing the child perform tasks that require careful observation and other visual-spatial skills can be beneficial.
- *Attention:* Younger children may be expected to lack sustained attention and be overactive, while kindergartners should develop the ability to remain on-task for a sustained period. Observation can reveal problems in this area.
- *Maturation.* Parents can provide information about a child's ability to care for him or herself and for others. From this information, along with observation, a child's level of general independence can be determined.

Finally, periods of diagnostic testing should reveal a child's rate and style of learning and insight into beneficial forms of instruction by providing valuable data on his or her performance over time and across contexts.

RESOURCES

"Assessment During the Early Childhood Years" Doris Johnson, LDA Newsbriefs, January/February 1999, pages 12-20